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SUBJECT: TOUR DE TABLE WITH BASRA'S SUNNI SHEIKHS AND CLERICS

¶1. (SBU) Summary: In a June 28 meeting with the Deputy Team Leader and other Basra PRT members, 14 Sunni tribal sheikhs and clerics from the districts of Basra, Abul Kasib, Al Faw, and Al Zubair, shared their views on political, security, and development issues. They voiced disenchantment with the Iraqi Islamic Party and favorable opinions of Prime Minister Maliki, complained about the police and army's detention practices, and asked for USG assistance in improving essential services and employment in the province. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) Dr. Khalid Al Mulla, Director of the Iraqi Educated Elite and Secular League (South Branch), led off the discussion. He stated that the sheikhs have rejected the Al-Qaeda in Iraq and other radical movements, and noted the positive role the Sheikhs have played in stemming sectarian violence. The sheikh said that Sunnis have the capability and the desire to help rebuild Iraq.

¶3. (SBU) Turning to politics, Dr. Al Mulla said that the Sunni Endowment and Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP) have basically disregarded Sunni interests. Other sheikhs echoed this sentiment, concluding that politicians make promises and pretend to support a certain position only to abandon it later. Noting that Prime Minister Maliki was viewed favorably within their communities, several sheikhs said that many Sunnis here had voted for the Rule of Law coalition in the Provincial Council elections. These Sunnis and others were looking to align themselves with Maliki again in the national elections in January. They thought that overall Sunni support for the IIP would fall dramatically.

¶4. (SBU) The Deputy Team Leader asked about the sheikh and cleric's experience with the security forces. The sheikhs said that both the police and army rely on suspect sources to gain information about their communities. They viewed both organizations as under the control of political parties or militias. A cleric complained that people were being apprehended and detained by both the police and the army based on little or no evidence. The detainees remain in detention until trial, and the cleric cited one case of an individual who has been in detention since 2004.

¶5. (SBU) On the issue of regional development, the sheikhs said that essential basic services were lacking in many areas of Basra Province. Their communities were suffering and people were in desperate need of jobs. They hoped that the USG could undertake various projects to remedy these problems, noting that such projects would not only improve their living conditions, but also enhance America's image. The Deputy Team Leader replied that \$2.3 billion had already been spent on projects in Basra Province. Money was available for additional projects, he added, but new brick and mortar projects would have to receive the approval of the ministry responsible for operation and maintenance to insure their sustainability. The sheikhs concurred with the Deputy that private investment would be vital to the region's future.

¶6. (SBU) Comment: The sheikhs' unhappiness with the IIP and their favorable views of PM Maliki and his coalition suggest that nationalist sentiments may be growing among the Sunni community in the south. Certainly the March/April 2008 Charge of the Knights operation has brought huge security gains to the region and diminished the power and influence of the Shia

militants -- all positive developments for the minority Sunni population. If the disappointment in the IIP expressed by our local sheikhs and clerics is shared in other Sunni communities beyond the province, then the IIP faces an uphill battle in the January 2010 national elections.

NALAND